NEW
NICK CARTER WEEKLY

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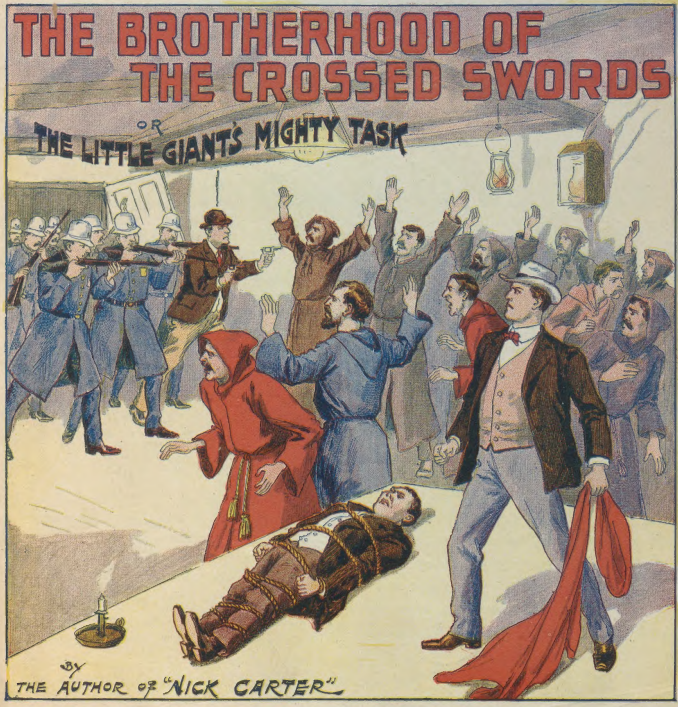
THE BROTHERHOOD OF THE CROSSED SWORDS

OR THE LITTLE GIANT'S MIGHTY TASK



BY THE AUTHOR OF "NICK CARTER"

The gang started to their feet with wild cries, but they were met as they turned by a score of Winchester rifles, aimed at their hearts, and, without an exception, they threw up their hands and surrendered.

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The Brotherhood of the Crossed Swords;

OR,

The Little Giant's Mighty Task.

Edited by CHICKERING CARTER.

CHAPTER I.

SENTENCED TO DEATH.

A sharp report, like the crack of a pistol, rang out in the silent room where Nick Carter was sleeping, and the detective, awakened as suddenly as if the bullet had struck him, leaped from the bed to the floor, at the same instant touching the electric button at his bedside, and so flooding the room with light.

One glance satisfied him that he was alone in the room. One quick, comprehensive survey of the apartment convinced him that whatever cause there might have been for the strange disturbance, unprecedented in his experience, there had been at least no actual attempt upon his own life.

The door which opened into the hallway was half ajar, and he leaped through it with the quickness of thought; but the hallway, like the room, was clear, and save for the sudden noise which had disturbed him, there was, and there appeared to have been, nothing unusual about the place.

He was about to turn back again into the room for the purpose of securing some of his clothing before he made a more thorough search for the cause of the alarm, when two doors on the third floor opened almost simultaneously, and Chick and Patsy made their appearance at the same instant.

They also had pressed the electric buttons in their rooms, so that now the third floor as well as the second was brilliantly alight.

Chick descended the stairs almost at a bound, for he knew that the noise had proceeded from below, and Patsy was not far behind him. Ten-Ichi had not yet appeared.

"What was it?" asked Chick, the instant he stood beside his chief.

"Some facetious individual has been attempting to play a trick, I should say," replied the detective. "Whatever it was, it happened in my room, and I suspect that we will find that it came through the open window. But where is Ten-Ichi?"

"He was still out when I went to bed," replied Patsy.

"See if he is in his room," ordered the detective of the young assistant, "and when you have done that, come back here."

Then, followed by Chick, he re-entered his own room.

There he paused in the middle of the floor, and, while a smile appeared slowly upon his countenance, he pointed toward some fragments of paper and a little heap of gravel on the bare floor near the rug, directly under the open window.

"There is the explanation of the pistol shot," he said. "It was not a pistol at all; merely a torpedo, such as boys make use of for the celebration of the Fourth of July. If it had fallen an inch to the right or the left from where it did strike—in other words, if it had lighted upon the rug instead of on the floor, there would have been no explosion."

Patsy returned at that moment and announced that Ten-Ichi was not in his room and that he had not been there; and Nick Carter merely nodded his head while he bent his energies to a more thorough examination of the immediate surroundings.

"Hello!" he said, presently. "Look here, Chick."

The detective had leaned forward and now he raised from the floor a long, slender, wire nail, and to this was tied the end of a black linen thread; and from the nail the thread led out through the open window into the darkness below.

"I should say," he said, raising his eyes for a moment to the faces of his assistants, "that there is a message of some kind attached to the other end of this thread. Rather an original method to select for sending one a message in the middle of the night, is it not?"

"I should say so," assented Chick.

"You see," continued the detective, "whoever threw this thing in at the window, made use of the nail merely as a weight to carry the torpedo and the thread. They hadn't far to throw it, from the pavement below, and they probably figured that it would strike against some hard substance, sufficiently firm to explode the torpedo—as it did do. I took the screen out of the window the last thing before I retired, for I fancied that the room was close. Well, whatever it is, we will see what is at the other end of the thread."

Suiting the action to the word, he pulled up the thread, and in a moment more discovered, as he had anticipated, that a letter had been tied to the end of it.

"Who should you say that this is from, Chick?" he asked, holding it for an instant, unopened in his hand.

"Well, at a guess," replied Chick, "from that society of assassination."

"And a good guess, I imagine. It is about such a method as I should think the Brotherhood of the Crossed Swords would adopt, in their desire to intimidate me; for I am convinced that they mean to get square with me if possible. Listen; I will read the letter aloud. We may as well all hear its contents at the same time."

He broke the seal, spread the letter open before him, and read:

"NICK CARTER: Your life, as well as the lives of those who were concerned with you in the events of the last few weeks, beginning with the unfortunate experience of Antonio de la Vuelta,* and culminating in the fight which took place in the house in the rear of Mulberry Street,† are forfeited to the society of which I have the honor to be the present head and chief—that society which is doubtless known to you as The Brotherhood of the Crossed Swords. This method of acquainting you with the decision of the society, is taken in accordance with our regulations, which provide that intended victims of the vengeance of our order shall inevitably be warned in advance of their approaching death.

"The membership of this society is comprised of de-

*See NICK CARTER WEEKLY, No. 401, "The House with the Open Door."

†See NICK CARTER WEEKLY, No. 402, "The Society of Assassination."

scendants of the oldest families of the Latin races, principally Italian. In carrying out our sworn obligations, we are forced frequently to depart from the usage of established customs and laws of the countries wherein our work is done; but we do not forget that we are gentlemen and the descendants of gentlemen, and, therefore, we inevitably give fair warning of our intentions.

"We never fail in our search for vengeance. Sooner or later the intended victim falls before the undying wrath of our order. The end must always be the same, no matter how long a time it may be deferred, and that end, as you have already surmised, is death.

"There is no pity, no leniency, no defaulting, and no unnecessary delay in the execution of our decisions, so you are advised to prepare, in any way you see fit, for the inevitable.

"This warning is vouchsafed to you, not from any feeling of sympathy for you in the fate which you are now called upon to face, but in a spirit of mere justice to those whom you must leave behind you when you are called away.

"You are urged, therefore, to prepare for death, which may fall upon you at any time after twenty-four hours from the time you read what is written here. If you have disposition to make of your properties, and directions to give concerning your worldly affairs, you are advised to attend to them during the ensuing twenty-four hours, for you may be struck down at any moment after that time. You are warned, however, not to assume that our vengeance is forgotten if the blow should not immediately fall after that time. While you are absolutely free from danger at our hands during twenty-four hours, you will never be free for one moment after that time, no matter even if the execution of our purposes should happen to be delayed after that, from day to day.

"Sometimes our vengeance takes the form of permitting a person to live for a time in the immediate shadow of death.

"Have I made myself sufficiently plain?

"Listen also to what follows:

"Your assistant, Chickering Carter, has also fallen under the same ban; whatever there is here which applies to you, applies also to him.

"Your assistant, called Patsy, is also in the same predicament.

"Your assistant, Ten-Ichi, has been condemned in the same manner. He is already in our power. He was captured during the early hours of this present night. He will not be permitted to escape; but he will be given every opportunity to make his preparations for death, of which events, like yourself, he will stand in no danger for twenty-four hours after you read this message.

"There is, perhaps, an apology due for this early capture of the young Japanese. I will add, in justification of our procedure in his case, that he had already taken our trail yesterday, and he succeeded in making himself so obnoxious that there was no other course for us to pursue. He was captured, and he will not again be set at liberty.

"Concerning the manner of taking off which will be visited upon you and those whom I have named in this letter, I can say no more. That a means in each case will be found for carrying out the decrees of our order, you may be assured; but just when the blows will fall and just how they will fall, I am not permitted to state.

"You are personally known to me, Mr. Carter; and I am also personally known to you. You have not been brought into contact with me for some time, and I doubt if you will connect me at all with the events which have led up to the writing of this letter. Shrewd as I know you to be, I have not the least fear that you will even surmise my identity, for the name by which I have been known to you is not even a foreign name, and I am convinced that my manner and my habits have become sufficiently Americanized so that you have not guessed that I am not what I seem.

"This letter, as you will have perceived, is written by the hand of a woman; but she writes it in the hypnotic state, and, therefore, does not even know that she is writing. The paper upon which it is written was procured at a wholesale house in Beekman Street by a boy who was engaged for the purpose, and from the time it was purchased until it came into my possession, it passed through so many different hands that it will be useless for you to attempt to trace it. In short, sir, every track has been covered.

"The regulations of our order, however, compel me to sign a name, and so I will sign the one which that order has given me—the one which is rightfully my own, in fact.

"BORGIA SPADA."

Nick Carter raised his eyes to Chick, and both men smiled.

"That is the very name which I adopted when I used that Italian disguise," said the detective. "Now, I wonder if the man who wrote this letter knows about that little affair, and is playing a little joke on me, or if he is ignorant of it, and there is indeed a Borgia Spada in the world. Humph! Several things are certain, my lads. One of them is that Ten-Ichi is in a bad fix, and another is that this letter is not intended for a joke."

CHAPTER II.

WALKING INTO A TRAP.

"I think, lads, that the best thing we can do now is to return to our beds and sleep on this matter. We will discuss it in the morning," said the detective, as he folded the letter he had just read aloud, and put it in his pocket.

"But," said Patsy. "There is Ten-Ichi."

"Yes? What about him?"

"Well, he's in danger. Ought we to sleep when we know what threatens him?"

"There seems to be nothing else to do at the present moment," replied the detective. "It is now almost three o'clock in the morning. I do not, myself, see just what good could be accomplished by going out into the street now and walking around without any definite purpose in view, do you?"

"No, sir. Only it seems a little hard to do nothing when he is in danger."

"Perhaps we can serve him best in that way, for a few hours, at least. Certainly we cannot hope to discover his hiding place without going at it in a systematic manner; and, besides, I have great faith in Ten-Ichi himself."

"Do you mean that you think he will find a way to escape from his captors?"

"I mean that I think that if there is a way for him to escape, he will keep rather busy trying to find it. Now suppose that either one of you were at this moment in Ten-Ichi's place. What would you be doing in such a case, Patsy?"

"Well, I expect that I would be trying to get out of it."

"Exactly. You would not sit down and hold your hands while you waited for Chick or me to do something, would you?"

"Hardly."

"But at the same time you would feel certain that we were looking for you in every way we could think of, wouldn't you?"

"Sure."

"So you would also try to make some sign, somewhere, which one of us would recognize, eh?"

"Bet your life I would."

"Good! Now, my idea is that Ten-Ichi will be thinking along the same lines that you would, under the same circumstances."

"I suppose so."

"And you will find that he will discover a means of putting us on the right track. You see, according to this letter, he was not captured till after dark. He hasn't had much time to do anything as yet; but I shouldn't wonder if something would turn up by the time we meet in the breakfast room. At all events, we won't attempt to make any move till after daylight."

The three detectives parted then, each to return to his own room; but when Nick Carter was alone, instead of returning to his bed, he partly dressed himself, and then, having arranged the lights to his satisfaction, and having drawn the white curtain across his window so that the light would cast a shadow upon it, he seated himself in a chair near it, and in such a manner that the outline of his figure was plainly indicated against the curtain.

He remained in that position about ten minutes, appearing in the meantime to be busily engaged in reading a book, but at the end of that time he rose and crossed the floor.

Then, with great haste he prepared a dummy figure, and having, by stooping and so keeping out of the line of shadow from the window, drawn the chair toward him, he quickly arranged the dummy in his own previous position and pushed the chair back near to the window again.

After that he worked even more quickly than before, for he jumped into a suit of old clothes, donned a slouch hat, hurried down the stairs and through the rear house so that he came out presently into the adjoining street.

This, as the readers of the Nick Carter adventures will remember, was an old time habit of his, when he did not wish to be seen entering or leaving his own home. He owned both houses, and the yards in the rear came together. There was a tunnel under the yards which connected the two houses, and the tenants in the rear house were installed there for the very purpose of making this use of their residence possible.

Ten minutes from the time he shoved the dummy figure into his place near the window, the detective had issued upon the adjoining street, and in three or four minutes more he staggered around the corner which would lead him into his own street—and he staggered and lurched as if he were in the last stages of intoxication.

He did not attempt to approach too near to the door of his own house. A glance had informed him that there was not a person in sight in the street, but all the same he was positive in his own mind that his house was watched, and he believed that if he was patient and waited there a sufficient length of time, one or more of the watchers would make their presence known.

He passed only a few doors down the street and then dropped upon the curb, where he sat with his head upon his hands as if he had gone as far as he could; but at the same time his eyes were taking in every detail of the neighborhood, and there was light enough in the street so that he could see if a person moved anywhere between that corner and the next one.

It was the areaway of the house directly opposite his own upon which he kept the most vigilant watch, and, presently, after he had been almost half an hour waiting, he was rewarded.

He happened to be looking directly at the front door of the opposite house at the moment, and he saw it move.

"Humph!" he mused. "Just as I thought. They used skeleton keys to get into the vestibule of the house opposite. Now, there is probably one man there, another on the corner above, and doubtless another one not far away from where I am now, who drew back out of sight to let me pass and sit down here. They have spotted me and now they are going to find out if I am the real thing, or if I am, like them, a watcher."

The man who had opened the vestibule door glided swiftly down the steps and turned up the street in the opposite direction.

Nick Carter grinned.

"He's going to test the man on the upper corner, and then he will come down here," he murmured; and it was evident that he was correct, for the man went all the way to the other corner, around which he disappeared for a moment; but, presently, he came into view again, and then, apparently without hesitation, he walked hurriedly toward the spot where Nick was seated.

As he drew near to the detective, he moved more slowly and cautiously, and finally came to a full stop not five feet away from him.

Nick Carter, in the meantime, appeared to be soundly sleeping.

"Hello, stranger!" exclaimed the newcomer. He spoke in perfect English, and yet there was something in the enunciation which suggested the foreigner to the trained ears of the detective.

Nick did not reply.

"Aren't you afraid you'll catch cold sitting there?" he asked, coming nearer to the apparently sleeping figure of the detective.

As before, the detective made no answer, and the stranger, after waiting a moment, came still closer, and, grasping Nick by the shoulder, shook him roughly.

"Wake up!" he said.

"Wake up yourself," replied Nick, crossly, and without raising his head.

"You'll catch cold," said the stranger, shaking him again.

"Aw, go to blazes, will you? Catch your own cold.

Leave mine alone. Mine's all right, if anybody should ask you. G'wan away."

"But you'll freeze if I leave you here," insisted the man.

"Aw, you give me a pain, you do!" growled Nick; and now he took his hands away from his face and turned a bleared and sodden-looking countenance upon the stranger. "What you worrying 'bout me for?" he demanded. "Roll over on your own side and leave me alone."

"But you can't sit here. You'll catch your death of cold."

"Will I? Where else am I going to sit, I'd like to know. Places are all closed up. I was fired out of the last one."

"Do you want a drink? Is that what is the matter?" asked the stranger.

For a moment Nick did not reply, and then, solemnly, he said:

"Say, stranger, would you mind saying that again, and saying it slow? It might be that I heard you right, but I ain't sure. What was it you said, now, honest?"

"I asked you if you wanted a drink."

"Did you ask it with any view of—wow, but I'm sleepy—of procurin' one, in case I happened to say yes?"

"I did, certainly. I know where there is a place open."

"Then, sir, that being the case, I'll answer without hesitation or equivocation, and also without mental reservation—I do."

"Then get up and come along with me, and I will take you where you can get one—or, rather, where I will get one for you."

"Now, you're talking!" exclaimed Nick, and he staggered to his feet and lurched into the arms of his new-found friend, when he would have fallen again to the pavement had not the other sustained him.

"You must 'scuse me, my frien'," said the detective, slowly. "Fact is, my feet ain' very steady under me just now, but I've been so long without a hooker that I shouldn't wonder if that accounted for it. You're my friend, you are. I'm broke—flat broke. Had lots of dough when I started out, but spent it all—spent it all, and I was too tired to walk home. Now, you have saved my life. You're a Samaritan, you are. You're a S'maritan of the right sort, too. Say! You weren't joking about that drink, were you?"

"Indeed, no. Come along. We'll find it."

"Then I'm your huckleberry," responded Nick, aloud. Mentally he added: "He is bound to make sure that I was not watching him, and he wants to get a good look at my face. Well, he is welcome to all he will find out from that." Then aloud again, he added: "Where is the place, stranger?"

"We'll have to go over to Third Avenue, I think. I know a place there."

Nick took his new-found friend familiarly by the arm, and they started through the street together toward the avenue.

The detective felt that he had struck a trail much more quickly than he had hoped to do it, for this man who had been watching his house would undoubtedly, in the end, lead him to one or more of his compatriots and associates.

And yet, Nick Carter should have realized that he was dealing with a class of scoundrels who are much more shrewd than the ordinary criminal. It did not, at the moment, occur to him that he was walking, open-eyed, into a trap, but that was exactly what he was doing.

CHAPTER III.

THE TRAP THAT DID NOT WORK.

Still playing the part of a person who has imbibed too often and too freely, Nick Carter followed his conductor along the street to Third Avenue, where, near the corner, he was shown into one of these all-night dens of iniquity which the Raines law has made possible in the city of New York.

They went, of course, into the back room of the place, for, after one o'clock at night, the regular bar is closed by hanging a sheet in front of it so that drinks may not be taken directly across it; but the bartenders still infest the region behind it, and even more drink

is served in that back room than would be the case if the whole place were open to the street as it is in the daytime.

It happened when Nick and his companion entered, that they appeared to be the only customers. For the moment the place seemed to be deserted save by the white-aproned bartender and his helper, who were dozing in their chairs.

But, as if the entrance of these two strangers were the signal for an access of business, the place began at once to fill with customers.

They entered in twos and threes, or singly, but they came with such a singular unanimity of purpose, and with such evident prearrangement of ideas—and moreover, inasmuch as they were almost without exception of the Italian laborer class, that Nick instantly assumed that instead of preparing a trap, he had walked into one.

"It cannot be possible that they suspect that I am Nick Carter," he told himself, "for, shrewd as they undoubtedly are, they could have no possible means of knowing that I have left my house—and they know that I was there not long ago, for they saw my shadow too plainly upon the curtain to be mistaken about it."

He passed a moment in rapid thought, and then like a flash it came to him how they had figured out the situation, and he smiled to himself to think how they might have been correct in their surmises if only he had happened to think of the methods they had guessed he would employ.

"I have it," he said to himself. "It is as simple as the nose on my face. They think that I am still taking it easy in my own house; but they also think that I have improved the opportunity to telephone to headquarters and to order somebody sent to my house to watch it till morning from the outside. They take me for that individual, and they have been ordered to 'do' any person who dares to meddle in this affair. That is about the size of it. They don't think, in getting me, that they are getting Nick Carter, but they propose to make it so hot for anybody who works in my behalf that I will presently have difficulty in getting any assistance whatever from the outside.

"Now, it is plain that this crowd was brought in here for the purpose of mobbing me, and it is equally plain that if I do not mind my P's and Q's, I stand a rather good chance of getting a stiletto between my ribs before I get out of this room."

While Nick was thinking, the second round of drinks had been ordered.

Nick had no dread of swallowing a knock-out drink for the very good reason that he had no intention of swallowing any of the vile stuff that was placed before him.

At all tricks of sleight-of-hand the detective was so expert that he had no difficulty in getting rid of his liquor without swallowing it, while at the same time those around him had no idea that he had not taken his portion the same as they had—but while his companion across the table, as well as the others who had come into the room, and there was now at least a dozen of them, had huge glasses of mixed ale or beer in front of them, he had ordered whisky, which was delivered to him in a small glass, quite easy for him to handle.

And Nick Carter knew quite well how to handle it each time so that they would think he had swallowed it, while in reality none of it passed his lips.

Also, while he had been thinking, and studying the crowd that had entered the place after him, he was studying his companion.

The man looked like a gentleman, and he was dressed like one.

Neither did he look especially like a foreigner until one studied him closely, and then the detective determined that he was that anomaly of creation which is known as a red-headed Spaniard.

Red-headed Spaniards and red-headed Portuguese have been numerous on the peninsula since the invasion of Wellington. There were so many red-headed Irishmen in Wellington's command that they naturally left their mark upon the natives, and the result has been a cross which has never proved to be much of a credit to either of the races; and Nick knew, moreover, that while the Brotherhood of the Crossed Swords was mainly an Italian organization, that it contained in its

membership, Frenchmen and Greek, Spaniard and Moor.

"I am satisfied of one thing," Nick mused, while he studied the man opposite him at the table; "this fellow is not the chief of his order, and neither is he very high up in that organization. He is not the sort of man they would select for a place of importance. He is merely a tool, and as such I must meet him. Moreover, I must get out of this place, by hook or crook, long enough to be on the watch when he leaves it in order to follow him; for as sure as shooting he will take me to the man I want to see."

"Drink up, my friend," said the stranger. "You don't act like a man who was very dry."

"Don't I?" replied Nick. "Well, then, as sure as you live I don't look right. I was never so dry in my life."

"Then why don't you drink?"

"Fact is, old fellow, I'm trying to make these drinks last as long as possible. I told you I was broke. You see I can't return the treat, and you won't want to keep doing the thing all the time."

"Won't I, though? Of course, I will. You don't suppose that I brought you here to give you only one drink, do you?"

"Well, I've had two already, and here comes the third. After that one I'm going to light out."

"What! Going to shake us?"

"Yep."

"What for? Don't you like the company you are in?"

"You bet I do; but I've got principle, I have."

"What do you mean by that?"

"I mean that it is against my principles to let you do all the treating. Next time we meet, I'll——"

"Oh, blow all that! You are my guest now. I'm doing the treating."

"Well, here's luck," said Nick, raising the third one and disposing of it as he had the others and in the same inimitable way, so that the onlookers could possibly not tell that he did not swallow it.

Then he put the glass down on the table in front of him and rose unsteadily to his feet.

"You'll 'scuse me now, I hope, mister," he said, thickly. "I've gotter go."

"Not on your life. Sit down."

"Nope," said Nick. "Can't. Gotter go. Must go. Had an 'gagement that I forgot all about. Gotter go. Dreffful sorry, but can't be helped. Gotter go."

He staggered unsteadily toward the door, and he was halfway there, for he moved much more quickly than he appeared to do, before they seemed to be aware that he meant what he said.

Then, when he had almost reached the door, two men rose from one of the tables near the entrance and barred his further progress.

"You gooda man; you nota shake us; no?" said one of them, placing his hand familiarly on the detective's shoulder.

Nick appeared to hesitate. For a moment he stood there in front of the two men, tottering on his feet as if he could with difficulty preserve his balance.

He could hear the shuffling of feet behind him and the movement of their legs, as the men arose in their places; but he did not permit it to appear that he heard.

"What you wantsh me shtay, for?" he demanded. "I'm no good to stay. Ain't got any money to blow with and can't stay, thatsh all about it."

As he uttered the last word he became instantly transformed.

With a move that was startlingly sudden, and as unexpected as it was quickly done, he brought his hands together behind the backs of the men who barred his way. Each one of his hands caught one of the men in the middle of the back directly between his shoulders, and the propelling force behind those hands was such as Nick Carter alone could exert without giving the impression that he was using unusual strength.

The result was that the two men came together with a force that was appalling, and with a violence of compact which made them grunt like a pair of angry hogs.

Just one loud, angry, stentorious grunt, more like a cry of pain than anything else, and then they were whirled around in their tracks and shoved backward into the room against their now advancing friends, before they realized what had happened.

At the same instant Nick backed through the door and closed it behind him.

The door through which he so suddenly disappeared gave entrance only to a little, closet-like room from which in turn a door opened into the side street, and it is safe to say that nine men out of ten, situated as Nick Carter was at that moment, would have continued on his way out of the place altogether, and have taken their chances in the street for escaping from the men whom he was sure intended to mob him.

But Nick had no such intention.

In that quick glance that he gave around the room, when he shoved the men among their friends, he had seen that the two bartenders were also in the room, and he knew, therefore, that the front of the place, that is, the barroom proper, was for the moment deserted.

In that instant he had decided how he would act—and with him to decide was to act.

The instant he passed through the door into the little room which served as a vestibule or hallway for the street entrance, he seized the street door, opened it, and slammed it shut again with a bang—but he did not pass through it.

He shut himself inside the vestibule, and then, with a quick spring, passed across the little place, through the door on the opposite side of it, which opened into the barroom, bounded on his tiptoes across the latter place, and with one quick spring leaped to the back of the bar.

There, for an instant only, he crouched down and listened. He could hear the men rushing through the street door in an eager search for him, and he knew that presently they would return again to talk it over. He also realized that there might be a search made for him, and accordingly he hurried to the front end of the bar, found the trapdoor which led into the cellar, raised it, dropped down into the darkness below, and closed the aperture after him.

"Now," he thought, "they can search till they get tired. I don't believe it will occur to them to look for me here."

CHAPTER IV.

THE MOUNTAINEER DOUBLE OF BORGIA SPADA.

There was one unpleasant feature about the cellar in which Nick Carter had confined himself a prisoner, and that was that he could not hear what was said by the men he had left behind him in the room above.

It is true that he could hear them as they went and came in their fruitless search for him, and he was aware when they also decided to search the front of the place, thinking, all too late, that it was possible that he had concealed himself there.

Once he thought that he was about to be discovered, for one of the bartenders came to the trapdoor behind the bar, and raised it; but he did no more than to peer down into the darkness, after which he dropped it into place again with the remark that it was all nonsense to look there for the man.

After that, feet tramped to and fro in the room overhead for a long time, but this noise gradually settled down into the murmur of voices, and he correctly came to the conclusion that they had abandoned the immediate search, and while they had doubtless posted watchers on the outside, they had, for the most part, returned to the room to talk it over there.

The night was rapidly approaching dawn by this time, and Nick did not relish the quarters he occupied.

It must not be supposed that the detective feared to fight his way out of that horde of men, for it will be remembered that he could easily have escaped when he first broke away from them, had he wished to do so.

That was not the point. The real point of his waiting was this:

He knew that among that crowd there were several, at least, who would eventually lead him to the men he most wanted to find, if he could only get the opportunity to follow at the right time, and with the approach of daylight, he realized that the time was drawing near.

He regretted now that he had not taken the time, before he left his house, to provide himself with the necessary things for a change of disguise, but he had worked so quickly, and he had left the house so suddenly, that he had not had the time to do so.

"It is absolutely certain," he mused at last, "that I have got to hear what those fellows are talking about, if I wish to accomplish anything in the way that affairs are shaping themselves now."

Save for the occasional shuffling of feet on the floor over his head, and the murmur of voices from the rooms above, all was silent now, and so presently he approached the trap again and raised it cautiously.

The bartender was entering behind the bar at the very moment he did so, and Nick closed the trap again and waited until he had provided himself with the beer and ale and withdrawn to the back room. Then he raised the trap a second time, climbed through it into the region back of the bar, and so made his way cautiously along until he could peer through into the back room.

The men were talking in Italian, but that language was as well known to Nick Carter as his own, and the very first words he heard convinced him that he had done well in coming above, and also determined him in his future course.

It was the red-headed Spaniard who was speaking when Nick came within earshot of him, and the words were evidently in reply to a question which had been addressed to him.

"Not till after seven o'clock," he was saying. "That will be more than two hours yet, and I might as well stay here till then. I'll hang on here till seven, and then I'll go my ways. The rest of you may go now, at any time you please, and you may look for your signs and instructions in the evening as usual."

Nick paid no attention to what was said after that, for that one remark contained all he cared to hear.

The man whom he most desired to follow would remain where he was till seven o'clock, and seven o'clock was yet two hours away. In those two hours Nick knew that he could accomplish what he most wished to do.

He did not even heed the next question, he was in such haste to get out of the place into the street before any of the men there should take advantage of the privilege that had been granted them, and decide to leave.

He turned instantly and hastened across the little room to the street door.

The chain had been put into place, but he dropped it silently, and then, with a quick motion, opened the door so that it made no noise, and only just wide enough to permit the passage of his body.

Then he stepped outside, and with the same gentleness and swiftness, closed and latched the door behind him.

The gray of dawn was already in the air, and, save for a solitary policeman who was waiting on the corner for his relief, there was not a person in sight.

Nick did not hasten away as if he were escaping from the place, but he walked slowly up the street away from the copper, who eyed him curiously, but otherwise made no sign.

The detective continued to walk slowly until he arrived at the upper corner; but when he had turned that, he quickened his steps, and was walking rapidly by the time he arrived at his house; and he took pains, moreover, to arrive by the same entrance where he had left it—that is, the house in the other street, so that he finally entered his own house through the tunnel under the yards.

As soon as he was in his own room he commenced rapidly to adopt the disguise he had decided upon, which was the same that he had used when he took the name of Borgia Spada—the name which his threatening correspondent had signed to the letter—for he had made up his mind that the writer of that letter was not aware of the name he had used at that time.*

It was the disguise of a mountaineer Italian—there are not many of them in this country—and they are usually intelligent and rather fearless men.

Nick Carter realized that if he hoped to win in this game of life and death between the secret organization which had sworn away his life, that he must fight them on their own ground. He knew that the only way in which he could hope to get possession of their secrets was to become one of them, and the only way he could do that was to risk everything upon his course of pro-

*See the last issue before this of the NICK CARTER WEEKLY.

cedure when he had once adopted it, and to fight it and face it through to the end.

He remembered that one Luigi Bonito* was really the only man who had used that name to him—in fact, that it was Luigi Bonito who had given him that name, when it had been demanded by the policemen, and he decided at once that, more than likely, Bonito had had some private reason for doing so; at all events, he was satisfied in his own mind that the real Borgia Spada had not heard of the episode.

Accordingly, he had determined, during the time he passed in the cellar beneath the gin mill, that he would adopt the disguise he had worn as Borgia Spada, and that if necessary, he would insist, even in the presence and in the face of the real person of that name, that he alone was the real Borgia, and that the other was an impostor.

He first darkened his skin to a rich olive tint. Then he fastened on a wig which might have been used by the model for the Neapolitan boy, so perfect was it, and this he fastened on in a manner peculiar to himself, so that there was no possibility that it would become disarranged. Then the flaring collar and the flashing red tie, the corduroy coat and trousers with their flaring buttons, the velvet waistcoat and the sash.

This, with the jaunty cap set on the side of his head over the raven curls, made him look sufficiently picturesque for the part he was to play, and, having provided himself with the weapons he usually carried, and with such other paraphernalia as he might be compelled to make use of before his return, he hurried to the room of Chick.

"Chick," he said, "I did not retire when you left me. I went out, and I have struck a trail. I can't give you and Patsy any orders just now, only to wait here until you hear from me. I will find a chance to use the telephone before the day is over. If, in the meantime, you should get any news of Ten-Ichi, use your own judgment without regard to me, only be sure to telephone here anything you discover, so that I may know what it is if I happen to return. Do you understand?"

"Sure."

"You will have some difficulty in keeping Patsy unemployed, so if the lad wishes to start out and try to find Ten-Ichi, let him go; only you be on hand in case I want you."

"Very good, sir."

"I don't suppose you need to be very much on your guard for to-day, for I am inclined to take Borgia Spada at his word. I don't think he will attempt anything against your life before to-morrow. And that reminds me——"

"Yes."

"I am Borgia Spada now. I am going to meet that chap on his own fighting ground, if I meet him at all. If I telephone for you to appear anywhere, I want you to make a fairly good copy of this disguise. Not exactly like it, you know, but enough like it so that you can pass for a kinsman—a cousin, say—Dominico Spada. You will take your cue after that, from me."

"All right. I will be ready."

"Watch for the telephone. I don't know when it will come or from where I will send it, but if the word 'Heretic' is in the message, it will be from me, no matter how it appears."

"Correct."

"And get yourself made up so that you can leave at a moment's notice."

"I'll be ready to start in half an hour."

"An hour will be soon enough. Three will be quite early enough, I think; but it is a good plan to be prepared. So long."

"So long, Nick. Good luck to you."

Nick Carter left the house by the way he entered it, through the tunnel, and he walked several squares to the southward before he finally turned into Third Avenue.

Then he paused at a fruit stand and engaged one of his supposed countrymen in conversation while he purchased an orange.

After that he strolled slowly up the street until he arrived at the corner where the saloon was located where he had had such thrilling experiences already.

In his right hand he carried a slight rattan cane, and

*See the last issue before this of the NICK CARTER WEEKLY.

with this he slapped his boots idly, while he waited on the corner for the red-headed Spaniard to appear.

When, at last, the front door of the saloon did swing open, Nick did not turn his head; he waited to discover in which direction the man who came out would turn before he looked to discover if it was the one whom he wished to follow.

Then he heard footsteps approaching from behind, and, presently, a hand touched him on the arm, and a voice said, in a low tone in his ear, speaking in Italian:

"Will you step inside the saloon, sir? A gentleman in there wishes to speak with you."

CHAPTER V.

THE CAPTURE BEHIND THE SALOON.

Nick turned when he was addressed and saw at a glance that it was the bartender of his previous experience in the place who had accosted him; but the bartender had spoken in a dialect of Italy, which it was a part of Nick's design to ignore, so he contented himself with staring into the face of the man and making no reply whatever, other than to continue to slap his boot with the stick he carried in his hand.

Then the bartender repeated his remark, but Nick continued to stare, while he permitted a derisive smile to cross his face slowly.

Presently, however, when the bartender seemed really nonplused by his inability to draw a reply from the stranger, Nick spoke in the purest of Italian, and said:

"Tell whoever it is who wishes to see me that I am here, waiting."

Then he turned his eyes away and gazed up the avenue as if the other person had gone out of his recollection.

The bartender hastened away. Then, after a short wait, Nick heard the door again, and for the second time steps approached him.

"Signore," said the voice of the red-headed Spaniard.

"Well?" said Nick, without turning. "I am listening."

"Will you deign to enter this place with me? It is not good that we talk here in the public street, in this city. It is not the same as our own country."

"As my own country, you mean," said Nick, with a savage intonation in his voice.

"Pardon me, signore. It is true that my ancestors are Spanish, but, as you know, my life has been passed in Italy; therefore, I also call it my country."

"Who else is inside that place?" asked Nick, abruptly.

"No one at all. I have been waiting here for you. Waiting and watching. It is half an hour sooner than you informed me to expect you."

"Ah!" said Nick; and he glanced hastily up and down the street, for he realized at once that this Spaniard, whose name he did not yet know, expected the man he was to meet to come to him there instead of himself going to him at some other place. "Yes; we will go in," he added, and he himself led the way through the door.

"Is there a private room here that we may use?" he demanded the moment they were inside.

"Yes, signore. I have it prepared," was the reply.

"Good. Where is it?"

"At the back of the house. It is separated from the house proper by an alley. It is a safe place and isolated, as you requested. Come; I will show you the way."

"Wait a moment."

Nick often said that he never thought so rapidly in his life as he did at that moment.

He realized that the Spaniard had mistaken him, for some reason which he could not tell, for the man he was to meet; but whether that man was the real Borgia Spada or not, he had no way of finding out at the moment. He also knew that the other man was expected in half an hour, so it devolved upon the detective to accomplish whatever he wished to do inside of that time; and he believed that the expected man must be costumed something as he was now, else why would the mistake have been made at all.

Still preserving the haughty attitude he had adopted from the first moment when the bartender had addressed him, he ignored that individual as if he did not

exist, and still addressing the Spaniard, as if it were he who owned the place, he demanded:

"Is there a telephone here?"

"There is, signore."

"Where? I wish to use it."

It was pointed out to him, and without hesitation he passed around the end of the bar, picked up the receiver and placed it against his ear.

"If this isn't a bluff I never heard of one," was the thought which flashed through his head just as the central office replied; and then, with a most delicious accent, he asked in English for the number he desired—his own private telephone number.

As he did so, he wondered if by any chance either of the men who were listening had ever heard of such a number, or if it communicated directly with the house of the man they most dreaded and hated, but as neither of them made any sign, he correctly surmised that so much of his bluff had worked all right, at least.

And while he waited, he also wondered if the man who was really expected would have the luck to walk into the place while he stood there with the telephone at his ear; but while he was wondering on these things, the voice of Chick replied.

Nick spoke to him in Italian.

"Is that you, Dominico?" he asked. "Ah! Good. I have found the place without difficulty. Are you ready to come here at once, my heretico? Yes? Good! You will cross to Third Avenue, and you will walk up Third Avenue on the west side of it, until—wait."

Nick, still with the receiver at his ear, addressed the bartender.

"You will watch through the window for my kinsman, Dominico Spada?" he demanded; and then, as if a reply was unnecessary, he again spoke through the telephone, adding:

"You will walk up the avenue on the west side of it until you come to a saloon where a man will call to you as you are passing. Then enter. You will be conducted to me. That is all."

He hung up the receiver and turned to find that the two men in the saloon with him had almost prostrated themselves to the floor in their efforts to do him homage.

"Pardon, your excellency! Pardon, your highness!" they were saying. "We did not know that we had the honor of being in the presence of the great Borgia Spada."

"Who else, then, did you expect?" demanded Nick, with a smile.

"We did not know, save by the costume, signore—pardon me, your highness."

"I only hope that Chick will get here before the expected costume arrives," was Nick's mental comment; but aloud he said:

"There are two whom I expect. They will look much like me. Look! I will show you how to admit the proper one first."

There was a black board over the lunch counter which was used for writing the names of dishes which the proprietor provided for his customers to eat, and Nick stepped quickly across to it, seized the chalk and wrote in large letters, the word "Heretic."

Then, turning to the bartender, he said:

"To the one who enters first, who looks like me, point out that word and ask him if it has any meaning for him. If he says it has, bring him to me at once. If he says that it has not, ask him to wait, and then do you come and inform me that he is here. Do you understand?"

"Si, signore."

"And if the one who enters first, has the meaning, and you have conducted him to me before the arrival of the other one, when that other one comes, you will ask him to wait while you inform me that he is here. Do you understand?"

"Si, signore."

"It is well. Now"—and he turned again to the Spaniard—"we will go to the private room and wait."

The Spaniard led Nick through the back room of the saloon, into the yard and across it to a smaller house in the rear. This they entered, and there he was conducted up a short flight of stairs to the second floor, where they entered quite a large room which was furnished almost sumptuously.

The carpet on the floor was thick and rich. The furniture was old and splendid, and had at some time, without doubt, graced much more spacious quarters than that dreary den in the rear of a Third Avenue saloon.

But the detective had scarcely had time to look around him, to notice the rich hangings of the place, the costly paintings, and the many attempts at rich decorations which seemed so out of place in that room, when there was a rap at the door and the bartender announced that the first of the expected guests had arrived.

"He understood the word, your excellency, and I brought him to you at once," he explained; and Nick saw the smiling face of Chick, richly disguised, over the broad shoulders of the bartender.

"Enter, Dominico," he said, with dignity. "You have come in good time."

"And the other? When he comes?" asked the bartender.

"Do as I have already directed you to do, dog!" ordered Nick. "If you wish to keep breath inside your accursed body, obey my orders without question. When he appears ask him to wait a moment. Then inform me that he is here. When you have done that, I will tell you what to do next; but see to it that he waits in the saloon until you have brought me word of his presence."

"I will obey your highness."

"See that you do so. Begone now."

Nick stood watching the door until the bartender had disappeared and he knew that he was out of hearing.

Then, like a flash of lightning, he wheeled, and with one bound he was upon the Spaniard.

Before the red-headed conspirator could do aught to defend himself, Nick Carter's iron hand had seized him by the throat, and he was forced backward until he fell to the floor.

"Now, Chick," he said, coolly, in English, "fix a gag for this fellow, and fix one which he won't be able to dislodge. That is right. Have you got your irons with you?"

"You bet I have."

"Well, clip them on his wrists and ankles. I wish to be ready for that other chap, when he arrives, and we haven't much time to spare. He is due about right now."

The red-headed Spaniard had not uttered a word for the reason that he could not, but if murderous glances could have killed, both detectives would have fallen dead in their tracks where they were.

There was a sort of cupboard in one corner of the room, and into this the detective thrust him, making him still more secure by the use of a third pair of steel shackles, light but strong, with which he fastened him to the latch of the door.

"You will wait there until I want you, my red-headed friend," said Nick, cordially, as he was about to close the door. "You look ugly enough to kill something just now, and you think that nothing on earth can make you talk, and betray your friends, but I've got a trick which I will show you after a while, and you will find that it loosens all tongues in a truly wonderful way."

He closed the door then and turned away, and, just as he did so, there was a rap at the outside door again.

"Good!" said Nick. "The expected has arrived. Now begins the really serious work of this case, Chick."

CHAPTER VI.

NICK CARTER'S GREATEST BLUFF.

Nick Carter stepped quickly to the door and threw it half open.

The bartender stood there expectantly, and at once announced that the third Italian mountaineer had arrived, and that he was awaiting with great impatience in the barroom.

"All right," replied Nick. "Have you told him who is here?"

"No, excellency: I have told him nothing. I remembered your orders, and I have not exceeded them."

"It is well that you have not. Is the gentleman alone?"

"Surely, signore."

"Then let him come here at once. You need only to show him the way."

"*Si, signore.*"

"Now, Chick," said the detective, as soon as they were alone, "I haven't the least idea in the world who this fellow is. I supposed at first that he was the real Borgia Spada, but if he is, the men who were here do not suspect it. I have gathered this much from what I have seen and heard in this place: Whoever he is, he directed the sending of the letter which I received this morning, and he placed the watch on my house which resulted in the capture of the fellow we now have locked up in the closet.

"Furthermore, the men who were here with the red-headed Spaniard, and he himself, I think, are not to the confidence of the order we are after; they are only its tools. This saloon, which as you see is owned by an Italian, is one of their meeting places. This room that we are in is doubtless reserved for some dignitary of their order, and you, as well as I, can see at a glance that it has not been used of late.

"Now, the explanation of that, to my mind, is that Borgia Spada has just arrived on the scene; that he is new to this country; that he is actually a mountaineer Italian whose costume, by a fortunate accident, I happened to copy, at least in part, so long ago as when I was engaged in that matter in Grand Street; that he was sent for, or was already on his way to take charge of affairs in this city, and that he arrived just in time to engineer my execution, if it can be engineered, and —that it was arranged that he should meet this red-headed fellow here.

"We will suppose that he experienced some difficulty in understanding the exact saloon where he was to meet them, and that he was told to walk past several of them until he was accosted as I was, and so led into the place.

"Now, my hurrying home and adopting this disguise, and then returning here and deciding to wait on the corner until my man came out or until somebody worth following entered, was fortunately the very thing which put the controlling play of the cards in my hands.

"When I told you to adopt the same disguise that I was using, I was merely using my old tactics, which enables you and me to appear to be in two places at once, but as it has turned out, it was a fortunate suggestion.

"I think the man who is coming here is the real Borgia Spada. He may or he may not be. In any case, both he and the man we have in the closet must be made to talk. We must get the secrets of the Brotherhood of the Crossed Swords from them, and we must make such good use of what we discover that we will be enabled to rescue Ten-Ichi before midnight tonight."

"We will have to work rather swiftly to do that, too," said Chick.

"Sure. But it can be done, as you shall see. Hush! He is coming."

They could hear steps approaching and Nick, with a motion to Chick to be silent and to wait, stepped close to the door.

The footsteps came nearer and then halted just outside the door.

After that there was a moment of silence, and then a single blow was delivered against it on the opposite side.

Nick Carter was a member of many secret orders. He had worked his way into lodges many times. He knew that in many of the societies to which he belonged there were raps and counter raps to give and receive, and so, instead of opening the door at once in reply to the signal of the single blow, he rapped twice in return.

Instantly it was responded to by two raps on the other side, whereupon he rapped once in reply to that; and then, without waiting to discover if more raps would be given from the other side, he threw the door wide open.

Even he was for an instant taken aback by the appearance of the man who stood in the opening, so exactly like his own was it. If the detective had been furnished with a model from which to copy the design

of his own make-up, he could not have made a more exact copy of the one which appeared in the doorway.

The man on the threshold did not hesitate.

As soon as the door was ajar, he stepped through it into the room, and Nick, who had not released his hold on the door, quickly closed it

As the stranger stepped into the room he half turned, and then as Nick closed the door and faced him, he drew himself up haughtily, and, in Italian, asked:

"Are there two Borgias—two Spadas, in the world?"

"It would seem that there are three," replied Nick, without a change of countenance.

In obedience to a sign from the detective, Chick stepped forward into view at that instant, and the stranger, perceiving him, uttered a low exclamation, and started back.

Even the two detectives were not prepared for his next move, which was made entirely without warning, and was, therefore, unexpected.

As he started back, his hands flew to his hips, and then, like lightning, they rose again, and simultaneously with that motion the twin reports of pistols rang through the room.

But for the agility of both the detectives, and the fact that long experience in the life they led had taught them never to be off their guard for an instant, both must have fallen before that double fire; but, as it was, each had seen the motion of their enemy in time to defend himself against the consequence of it.

Both leaped aside at the same instant, and while Chick felt the breath of a bullet as it whizzed past his left cheek to bury itself in the wall of the room, Nick felt the burn of the other one where it pierced his clothing and actually grazed the flesh of his side.

But it was not in the calculations of either of the detectives to permit this man to make a second attempt to shoot them.

The double report, which came almost as one, had scarcely sounded in the room ere both men had leaped forward upon the assailant.

They took him upon either side at once, and it was well for them that they did so, for it is certain that they were not at all prepared for such an exhibition of agility and strength as he gave them then and there.

For a moment it seemed as if his strength was almost as great as that of the two men combined, but that was only in the first instant of the attack, when neither of them expected him to show a moiety of what he really possessed.

As it was, he tore himself free from that double grasp almost as soon as it fell upon him, and, as he leaped back away from them, his hands were raised again; a revolver still was held in one of his hands, while in the other there gleamed the long blade of the favorite weapon of Italy, a knife.

But the revolver was not given time to speak, and the knife could not act.

Like a flash Nick Carter returned to the attack, and this time he was not sparing of his great strength.

He bounded forward and passed under the guard of the stranger before he had an opportunity to use either weapon.

Then the detective's hands shot upward and seized the right and the left wrists of his opponent.

With relentless and steady strength he then bore down upon the hold he held, until the fingers of the stranger relaxed upon the pistol and the knife, which, thus released, clattered to the floor, where Chick secured them.

Still the awful pressure bore down and farther down, until the stranger's knees began to give way under him, and, at last, with a sigh of pain, he permitted himself to be forced to his knees on the floor in front of the detective.

And all this time not another word had been spoken in that room: not one of the three had made a remark, and now, when Nick Carter finally broke the silence it was in a tone which might have been regarded as conventional in a drawing room.

"I think, sir, that you are ready to admit that I am the stronger," he said, with a smile.

For a length of time which might have compassed a full minute, the stranger glared into the eyes of the detective without venturing a reply; and then, in a

voice from which he vainly tried to eliminate all evidence of the pain he felt, he said:

"Who are you, and why are you here?"

Now, the reader will remember that Nick Carter had already determined to play the part of Borgia Spada to the end, even if it should come to the point where he was compelled to assert his claim in the face of the real Spada, and to deny the right of the real Spada to that name. He believed now that he was in the presence of the real Spada; he believed that the man who was on his knees before him was the real Spada, but that did not deter his original intention in the least, and, therefore, he replied:

"I am Borgia Spada; that name should be a reply to both your questions."

The detective was somewhat surprised, when he made the claim to the name thus calmly, to notice that the man before him shrank a little, as if he were nonplused by the answer, and he instantly decided that it was quite possible that the man on his knees was also masquerading in the name of Spada, for some reason which had not yet appeared.

"There cannot be two Spadas," said the man, lamely.

"Ah! yes," replied Nick. "There can be, for there are two. I am Borgia Spada, and this man here is my kinsman, Dominico Spada." Then, bending nearer to the man on the floor, and tightening the grasp he held on the wrists of the man until the pain thus produced brought beads of sweat out on his brow, he demanded, sternly: "And you, impostor, who are you?"

"I am the Borgia Spada who was expected here today," replied the man, slowly, and now with quite evident fright in his manner.

"Yes," said Nick, perceiving his advantage, for he could now read the man plainly, "you are the man who has dared to impersonate me; you are the man who has"—he paused for an instant to give force to his words, and then added, impressively—"forfeited his life to me, as well as to the sacred brotherhood he has betrayed!" and he glared into the eyes of his captive.

For an instant only the prisoner sought to return that stare, but he quailed before it, and after a half minute of time his joints gave way limply, and he groveled at the feet of the detective, crying in Italian:

"Mercy, Spada, mercy! Spare me, and I will reveal all! Spare me!"

CHAPTER VII.

IN THE CHAIR OF EXECUTION.

"So," said Nick, coldly, "you have decided that you will confess, have you?"

"Yes, yes, I will confess!" cried the now thoroughly cowed man. "I would not have dared to do what I have done had I known that you lived, but I believed that I had proof of your death. I was sure that I saw you die—I was sure——"

"You were sure, because you believed that you had killed me yourself; is that it?"

"It was an accident, Spada! It was an accident, believe me. The rope which precipitated you down the mountain broke; I did not cut it. It is true that I believed it a fortunate accident for me, but it is also true that I did not do it."

"And after that," continued Nick, inexorably, guessing what to say from the cue that was given him by the prisoner's words, "you waited a suitable time before you appeared in the guise of Borgia Spada. Since then what have you done?"

"I have done no wrong save to say that you were dead, and I honestly believed that you were dead. I have worked faithfully for the good of the order, as you would have done in my place—as I believed you would have wished me to do if you could have directed me."

"And now?" asked Nick.

"I am working for the good of the order still, as you will presently know."

Nick smiled sardonically. Then he turned to Chick.

"Dominico," he said.

"*Si, excellenza,*" replied Chick.

"Go and see what is below this room; but first, there is some comfortable-looking picture wire on the walls there. Take down a picture or two and let us use the wire to bind our friend, here."

"Do you intend to kill me?" asked the man who groveled on the floor.

"Not now," replied Nick, coolly. "You shall know your fate presently. I will question you after a while—when I am ready. For the present you shall be bound and gagged and put away out of sight until I have attended to other duties. After that, I will talk to you."

He was speedily bound with the wires taken from the pictures on the walls, and then he was effectually gagged.

While Nick himself attended to the latter part of this work, Chick inspected the building and discovered that there was a sort of half cellar under the room, and into that place, reeking with slime and filled with cobwebs the last prisoner they had taken was placed.

"If you attempt to make a sound, or make any effort to escape until I return for you, I will show you no mercy," said Nick, upon leaving him; "on the other hand, if you wait, and if when I question you, you will confess everything without restraint, I may be induced to show you mercy."

They left him then and returned to the room above.

"Now," said Nick, "fetch the red-headed Spaniard from the cupboard, and I will show you how easy it is to learn the secrets of an Italian brotherhood."

There was one common chair in that sumptuously furnished room, and this Nick placed directly in the middle of the floor. He also provided himself with more of the picture wire, and then he directed that the prisoner in the closet be brought out.

The man was forced into the chair, and his feet were bound tightly to the legs of it.

Then his hands were brought behind him, and they in turn were bound with the wire, so that they were stretched behind him around the back of the chair.

Next, another section of the wire was brought several times around his body, one of them pressing against his throat, and then the gag was removed from his mouth.

There was a stationary washstand in one corner of the room, and beside it, on a second stand, a common wash bowl and pitcher. There were also several towels there, and all these things Nick had seen when he first entered the room. It was the sight of them and the knowledge of what he could accomplish by their use, that had determined him in his course of procedure.

Without deigning so much as a word to the wondering prisoner, he now went to the washstand, and from one of the faucets he presently secured the pitcher full of lukewarm water.

He poured some of this into the bowl and with that, and the pitcher and some towels, he returned to the chair in the middle of the room and passed behind it.

Next, he bared the prisoner's left arm to the shoulder—that is, so that the sleeve was rolled almost to the shoulder, and then having soused one of the towels in the water, he fastened it round and round the lower part of the prisoner's arm. Then, with more of the wire, he fastened the arm so that it could not be moved in any direction.

When these arrangements were completed, he called Chick to one side and gave him in a low tone his instructions.

"I will show you, Chick, what mental impression will do to destroy the physical power of a strong man. This fellow is a dogged scoundrel. He would not talk and give up his secrets, save under the greatest terror, and mere threats would have no more effect upon him that rain on a duck's back; all the same, I will show you how to make him talk, and I will do it without hurting him by more than the mere pricking of a pin."

"What are you going to do?" asked Chick.

"I am going to make our red-headed friend believe that he is bleeding to death. It is, as you are aware, the most painless death in the world, but also the most terrifying."

"I see."

"When he is convinced that he is actually bleeding to death and that there is no help for him save by a full confession, he will make it."

"What am I to do?"

"This: I have bound the wet towel around his arm to emphasize the impression he will receive. The towel is now cooled somewhat. That water in the pitcher is about the temperature of blood. I will go behind

him and jab a pin into his arm just above the wrist, so that it will make him yell, and I will then step in front of him again with my open knife in my hand to give him the impression that I have cut him with the knife."

"I see."

"When he asks me what I have done, I will tell him that I have opened a vein in his arm, and that I have done it in such a way that he will bleed to death in exactly two hours and fifteen minutes. In the meantime, you will have dipped another towel into the warmer water in the pitcher, and the contents thus absorbed, you will squeeze gently upon the towel that is bound around his arm. That water, warmer than the other, will give him the impression of blood. It will drip slowly down and trickle, drop by drop, from the ends of his fingers into the bowl. The impression will thus be exact, only you must not neglect your part of the duty, and you must keep the flow as nearly the same as possible.

"He will stand the test for a little while, but presently he will fancy that he is growing weaker. To heighten that idea, you will, whenever you think it time to do so, carry the bowl over there to the basin and empty it, so that he will think it is his blood you are pouring into the sewer.

"When he fancies that he is growing weaker, his courage will also weaken."

"And then he will begin to beg for mercy."

"Exactly."

"And then?"

"Why, then, I will begin to question him."

"And he will tell all he knows."

"Sure. More than that, he will believe that he is suffering so that he will not notice the manner of my questions. He will think that he is merely confessing something which we already know, while in reality he will be telling us all that we wish to know and could find out in no other way.

"You see, he is bound and helpless in the chair. He cannot move to escape. He knows that it will be useless to cry out, for help will not come to him. We are away from everybody, in here, and if others should come, I fancy we can handle them in about the same manner we have done these fellows."

"You bet your life. But one thing; how did you get onto the fact that the last man was an impostor?"

"Easily. I guessed it from his talk. Once upon a time I had to work into an organization known as the Knight Hawks. That taught me a lot of things. Look at him now, Chick."

"Yes; I am looking."

"He is beginning to get uneasy. He is wondering what we are up to, and why we have bound him in that unusual manner and tied the towel around his arm. Well, we may as well enlighten him now, I think."

"I know my part of the work all right. You need have no fear of me."

"All right. Come ahead."

They approached the chair in which the prisoner was seated, together, and he watched them with bloodshot eyes in which terror was still mixed with dogged courage.

"What are you going to do with me?" he asked in Italian.

"That you shall soon know," replied Nick, coolly. "You will find that Borgia Spada has a way of his own when he deals with traitors?"

"But how have I been a traitor?"

"You have served another master than me. Did you not hear his confession while you were lying in the closet?"

"Yes; but how was I to know that he was not the real Spada?"

"You should have known. It was your duty to know."

"My orders came to me in the right way, and with the right word. There was no way for me to know that I was obeying the wrong master, or, rather, that the man whom I was obeying was not my master."

"That you shall tell me in your own way, and in your own time."

"How do you mean?" demanded the prisoner.

For reply, Nick stepped behind the chair and seized the prisoner's wrist. Then, after a second of waiting,

he jabbed a pin deep into the man's flesh, so that he cried out in pain; and then Nick, with his open knife in his right hand, returned coolly to the front of the chair again.

"What have you done?" demanded the prisoner, now white with terror.

"Done? I have opened a vein in your arm in order that you may die without pain, that is all. You should thank me for it. You will experience no suffering. You will die without a struggle. It is easy to bleed to death."

"Bleed to death!" cried the miserable man, and he rolled his eyes helplessly at Nick.

CHAPTER VIII.

THE SECRETS OF THE ORDER.

"Bleed to death!" he repeated, after a short pause. "Bleed to death!"

"Yes," replied Nick. "That is what I said to you. According to the best information I have on the subject, it should require a little more than two hours for a man of your strength to succumb to the loss of blood that you are now undergoing."

"My God! Is it true?" gasped the prisoner.

"Quite true," replied Nick, imperturbably. "Can you not feel the blood as it trickles down your arm?"

"Yes, yes, I can feel it. Stop it, won't you?"

"Why should I stop it?" asked Nick. "Have you not, according to the rules of our order, forfeited your life?"

"But I did it innocently."

"How am I to know that?"

"I can prove it."

"Then do so."

"But how?"

"By telling me the entire story from beginning to end."

"The story! What story?"

"The story of your betrayal of the order."

"But you are here now. You came to this house to-day. You should know it all."

"I do not know it as you know it. I do not know your story, and hence, so far as you are concerned, I know absolutely nothing."

"Will you stop the flow of blood from my arm?"

"When you have convinced me that you deserve to have it stopped I will do so. An execution, as you are aware, cannot be delayed once it is in progress. If you can stop it by proving that it is not right that it should continue, do so."

"But how? Tell me how to do so?"

"Let your own good sense tell you that."

"What do you wish me to tell you?"

"Nothing which you do not wish to tell; everything which you would like to disclose to your chief in order to spare your life which you have forfeited."

"Oh, Heaven!" groaned the man.

Nick turned away, but he had not taken a step when the prisoner called to him.

"How shall I begin?" he asked, in a weak tone. "Already I am growing weak. I can feel that I am. How shall I begin?"

"Did you ever see me before?" asked Nick, by way of reply.

"No; I know now that I never did."

"Then begin as you should begin if you were giving me the history of your life."

"But how, how? Tell me how, and I will begin at once."

"Begin, then, with your name. Say that you are so and so; that you were born in such a place; that you were first made aware of the existence of our order in such a manner. That you joined it in such a place; that you were taken into it after a certain manner, describing that manner. In short, prove to me beyond the peradventure of a doubt that you are a member of the order, that you are not an impostor, and I will begin to believe. Then, when you have got thus far, let me see how well you are posted about what is taking place in this city. Let me know if you can describe the prisoner who is to be executed before daylight to-morrow. In short, let me know all that you know, and—but I will say no more to you. You have already wasted fifteen minutes of your time."

"I am Bernardo del Carpio," cried the prisoner. "A descendant of the great Bernardo."

"And yet you have Spanish blood in your veins," retorted Nick.

"Ah! yes. I regret it. It is there. I am a Carpio on my mother's side. Salerno is my real home; the home of my ancient family."

"Correct," said Nick. "Go on."

"One day while I was looking off on the blue gulf, a stranger came to me.

"'You are a Carpio,' he said, and I replied that I was not; that I was a Spaniard; then he repeated again: 'You are a Carpio. Take this.'"

"What did he give to you?"

"A letter."

"What did the letter contain?"

"An order for me to attend at a meeting of the Brotherhood of the Crossed Swords, to be held in Rome a week from that day."

"And did you attend?"

"I did."

"And were you taken into the brotherhood at that time?"

"No; not till a year from that time."

"Why not?"

"I was placed upon probation."

"And after that?"

"I received my initiation."

"In Rome?"

"Yes; in the ruins of the castle of the Borgias."

"Describe that initiation."

"Must I do so?"

"Yes."

"But you have not yet proved yourself to me, and my life is forfeited if I reveal the secrets of the order."

"And at the same time you are bleeding to death. Take your choice."

"I was compelled to learn by heart a list of the names of the members of the order who belong to the ruling degree."

"The gentlemen of the order?"

"Yes."

"And how many of them are left now?"

"But six. Shall I name them to you?"

"No. Give me only the name of the leader."

"It is your own. Borgia Spada."

"And who is next to him?"

"Antonio de la Vuelta."

"Where is he now?"

"Alas! he is insane."

"Who assumes his place if he is incurable?"

"Luigi Bonito."

"Ah!" said Nick. "And where is he?"

"There is a Luigi Bonito here in New York, but he is merely a cousin of the real Luigi, who has strangely disappeared. He went into the mountains with you—into the Alps Mountains, and report had it that he was lost there by the rope parting and letting him fall into a crevasse."

"Ah!" said Nick, again. "And do you not know that the man whom you have believed was I—the man whose confession you even now heard while you were in that closet, was Luigi Bonito, and that it is to him that you betrayed me?"

"Yes; I see it all now. He thought that he had killed you, and he took your place so that he could succeed the more quickly to the fortune."

"We are getting at it," said Nick. "With Borgia Spada dead and Antonio de la Vuelta insane, there was nothing between him and the fortune our brotherhood was to provide for him. Now go on. After you had learned the names, then what?"

"I took the oath."

"And what was that oath?"

"Must I repeat it?"

"You are still bleeding."

"I swore to forfeit my life and my hopes of heaven if I did not keep the oath. I swore to hold the names of the sacred families of the order, your own being first, above all things in this world or the next. I swore to obey implicitly every order which I received in the name of Borgia Spada, as long as Borgia Spada lived; if coupled with the mention of the name, the person who uttered it, held the forefingers of each hand

so that they would form the sign of the crossed swords, and if at the same time there was somewhere in sight on his person a letter B, I swore that if I were commanded to kill, I would kill without question, even if the person condemned to fall by my hand should be my own offspring."

"And you have lived up to that oath?"

"I have."

"You have killed others?"

"Many others."

"Without questioning the order?"

"I have never questioned an order that I have received from the brotherhood."

"You have done well. What brought you here?"

"To this country?"

"Yes; to America."

"I was sent here as one of the collectors for your fortune."

"How much has been collected?"

"All of the million save two hundred thousand dollars, and that sum is to be demanded to-day of a detective who has been condemned; a man named Nick Carter, who, if he will pay without question, will be spared. It is said that he can well spare the sum."

"Doubtless. And with that sum I suppose the million will be complete?"

"Yes."

"You already have one of this man's friends in our power, have you not?"

"Yes. He is a Japanese. He is to be executed at sunrise to-morrow."

"Even if the money is paid by his friend?"

"Yes; just the same. It will convince him of the certainty of his own fate unless he pays."

"I see. Where is this young man who is to be executed confined?"

"At our secret headquarters. You know where that is; if you do not, you know that I cannot tell you, for the reason that I do not know."

CHAPTER IX.

ONLY ONE WAY IN, AND ONE WAY OUT.

"Have you forgotten that you are bleeding to death?" asked Nick, coldly, and without betraying the disappointment he felt at the announcement made by Del Carpio that he could not direct him to the secret headquarters of the Brotherhood of the Crossed Swords, for the reason that he did not himself know where they were located.

"Alas! no. I have not forgotten it," replied the man. His face was now almost as white as chalk, and if ever terror incarnate was depicted upon the features of a man, it was pictured on his.

Nick was silent for a moment, thinking.

His elucidation of the matter was simply that the oath of Del Carpio—the oath which he had been required to take upon joining the order, bound him to such inviolate secrecy when it referred to the places of meeting of the order, that he was now merely fulfilling his oath in refusing to divulge it under any circumstances.

"But," the detective argued to himself, "death in the present form, which he believes is before him now, is something which he never dreamed of facing. If he knows where that place of meeting is, I will make him tell."

Aloud, he said:

"I see that you remember the terms of your oath only too well for your own good, in this one particular."

"I would be a poor member of the brotherhood if I did not remember all the terms of my oath," he responded.

Then, as Chick squeezed a fresh supply of the warm water on his arm, and he felt what seemed to him to be

an added flow of the life fluid start from him, he uttered a low cry.

"Oh, sir, I pray you to stop the bleeding!" he said.

In reply, Nick merely looked at his watch.

"There is yet almost another hour before you will lose consciousness from loss of blood," he said, "and you have yet much to tell me."

"But what more is there to tell? I have told all."

"You have yet to describe how you made yourself known to the members of the brotherhood, when you arrived in America," said Nick.

"I did it in the usual way, of course."

"Ay; but describe that usual way, so that I may know that there is no mistake."

"It is against the terms of my oath to describe it to you."

"No," said Nick, recalling what the man had already told him, "it is according to the terms of your oath. Do you doubt that I am Borgia Spada?"

"No, sir, I do not."

"And is it not according to the terms of your oath to obey me in all things?"

"Yes."

"When you see this sign?" and Nick held his fingers crossed in front of the man, after the manner of the sign.

"Yes."

"And when, in default of having the letter B ready at my hand, I make one in the air, this, by writing it upon nothing with my finger?"

"Yes."

"And I say to you: In the name and by the order of Borgia Spada?"

"Yes."

"Then look you, Del Carpio, I have arrived here a stranger almost as you did long ago. I find upon my arrival that another has usurped my place and has made the members of the order in this country believe that he is Borgia Spada. I find that much has been done here of which I do not approve, and I trace out the doings of my brothers until I arrive at this saloon which you have appointed as a place of meeting. How do I know, pray, that there is not treachery on every side of me? How do I know that I may not meet death at the hands of the friends of the man who has betrayed me, the moment I put myself into their power?"

"Alas! I understand you only too well. Stop the bleeding and I will aid you with every power there is in me."

"When you have given me the aid I will stop the bleeding; not before."

"The method by which I made myself known to the brotherhood here, is the same that was taught me in Rome."

"So be it; nevertheless, tell it to me."

"But if it is the same and has not been changed, you should know it as well as I."

"You are bleeding to death and have now only about fifty-five minutes to live."

"Have mercy, Borgia Spada, have mercy!"

"When you have earned my mercy you shall have it; you shall not die, I promise you."

"Ah! You mean that?"

"Of a certainty I mean it."

"Then I will speak."

"Speak on."

"I applied at the secret headquarters at the midnight hour."

"Yes."

"I struck the door to which I had been directed and which was marked with the letter B and a cross."

"Yes."

"In return I heard two blows struck on the other side."

"Yes."

"I then struck once again, and after a short silence,

once yet again; then after another short silence the hand on the other side struck three blows, whereat I replied with one more and the door opened for me to enter."

"Yes."

Nick was still noncommittal. He merely listened, with an occasional nod of his head, as if he approved, and he could see that Del Carpio was watching him narrowly and eagerly.

Del Carpio continued:

"When the door opened, a masked and dominoed figure confronted me, and without a word he gave into my hands a mask and a domino.

" 'These are for you,' he said.

" 'When I have properly qualified,' I replied.

" 'Put them on,' he ordered.

" 'Only when you have given me full permission,' I replied.

" 'Come,' he said then, and I followed him into a room where for a moment we stood alone.

" 'Who sent you?' he asked of me then.

" 'Borgia Spada,' I replied. 'He ordered me to make this sign to you,' and I made the sign of the order. 'He told me to exhibit this to you,' and I pulled aside the front of my shirt and showed him the sign which we all wear.

" 'What more?' he demanded then.

" 'Nothing,' I replied.

" 'Have you no name?' he asked.

" 'I have a number and a name against that number. That is all.'

" 'Give me the number."

" 'One hundred and forty-two.'

" 'And the number of him who sent you is what?'

" 'It is the number before the first number;' I replied, and with that he pointed at the mask and the domino; I put them on, and I followed him inside. Does that suffice, Borgia Spada?"

"Ask yourself if it suffices. Do not ask me. You have yet thirty minutes in which to tell me all that you have not yet told."

"But, on my honor, and as you know, there is only one thing more which I have not told you, and that, as you also know, I cannot tell you."

Nick Carter shrugged his shoulders and turned away.

"Come back!" called Del Carpio. Already his head was hanging, from fancied weakness.

"Come back!" he called again; and Nick returned and stood before him again.

"Well?" he said.

"If I do not tell you the locality of the secret headquarters, you will let me bleed to death; if I do tell you, your own oath will compel you to let me bleed to death. How then am I to profit, no matter which way I do?"

"I am above the oath of the order. The oath of the order is made to me," replied Nick, calmly.

"And if I tell you, you will not let me bleed any longer?" demanded the man, eagerly.

"I have already assured you that your life would be spared if you left nothing unsaid which would convince me that you are as you would have me believe you are. I must be assured that you are sincere. You can only assure me by giving me this last, and in most cases, fatal information."

"I will give it to you, then."

"You have decided wisely, Del Carpio."

"You do not know New York well, but you can find the places?"

"I can find the places; yes."

"Across the Hudson River, opposite One Hundred and Thirtieth Street, is a place called Fort Lee."

"Yes."

"Above Fort Lee, following the bank of the river

until you are opposite One Hundred and Sixtieth Street, are the Palisades."

"Yes."

"Underneath the Palisades at the point I have described, hidden in a fissure in the rock which from the shore looks to be very narrow, but which in reality is fifty feet or more wide, there is a house built of rough stones. Do you understand me?"

"Perfectly."

"From the water, this house looks like a heap of stones. It cannot be seen at all from the land. The secret headquarters are there."

"And the door? Where is that?"

"It is at the back of the house, facing the cliff."

"And is there no other means of entrance or egress to and from the house?"

"No. Like our sacred order, there is only one way to get inside, and only one way to get out again. You enter by the ties of family and blood, and you leave only with death."

"Good!" said Nick. "I will stop the bleeding now."

CHAPTER X.

THE RAID ON THE SECRET HEADQUARTERS.

Suiting the action to the word, the detective stepped around behind the chair.

In a moment he had removed the wet towel from the arm of Del Carpio and released it from the wires which held it.

Then tearing a dry towel into strips, he quickly bound the arm as if he were binding up a wound, and then the wires which held him to the chair were loosened.

The man, who had withstood the mental suffering of his position so bravely, succumbed when he believed himself to be free from the peril that had menaced him, and as soon as the thongs were taken away he quietly fainted.

Nick lifted his form from the floor and placed him on a couch.

"The fellow has not lost enough blood from that pin prick I gave him to make a spot on a handkerchief the size of a nickel," he said to Chick, "and yet he would swear now, if he were conscious, that he has lost a quart at least."

"He looks as if he had lost a gallon," said Chick.

"And he felt so, too, for he believed that he was bleeding to death. It is a dangerous experiment to try upon one who is not very strong. There is a French lodge which performs one of its initiations in this manner, and men have been known to die under the severity of it."

"I felt sorry for him," said Chick.

"So did I. But it was necessary. Now we will have no difficulty in rescuing Ten-Ichi; but otherwise he would have died at sunrise to-morrow. These people are not bluffers."

"What is to be our next move?" asked Chick.

"I will show you. We will first revive this fellow, and you will take him away to my house. Put him in the padded room at the top and tell him he is to wait there patiently. When you have done that, and seen to it that he is secure—you might leave Patsy to guard him—go to the inspector and secure from him a detail of twenty men. We might as well have enough, for I do not wish any of them to escape, and I want to prove to all Italy that their societies of assassination cannot flourish in this country."

"Good!"

"Take the twenty men in a tugboat up the river shortly after dark. You might leave for the meeting place about nine o'clock. I think that will be time enough."

"Yes."

"You heard Del Carpio's directions how to find the place?"

"Certainly."

"Take your men ashore a little above the place, shortly before midnight, then work with them slowly down to the stone house so that you will arrive there almost on the stroke of twelve."

"All right. And then?"

"You know the entrance, and how to rap for admission. Have your men close behind you when you rap, and when the man appears with the mask and domino, rap him on the head."

"I see; and then?"

"One of you put on his domino and mask, and the other can put on those he carries in his arms. After that you have only to walk inside, taking care to leave the door open so that the others can follow you. Is that plain?"

"Perfectly. But where will you be all the time?"

"I will be inside, I expect."

"You will go there alone?"

"Not at all."

"But——"

"I shall go there with the man who is now waiting for us among the cobwebs in the cellar."

"But why do you take that risk? It seems unnecessary."

"Have I not told you that I mean to capture the entire brotherhood? There is only one way to accomlish that, and that is to have the whole membership present. The man down cellar, Luigi Bonito, who has posed for the man he now believes me to be, will obey the slightest order that I give him now, in order to save his worthless life."

"Sure."

"He was thoroughly cowed when we put him in the cellar; he will be abject when we take him out of it."

"I don't much wonder at that. You have a way of your own of bringing men to your terms."

"He thinks now that I intend to take his life. He will beg for mercy. I will pretend to be lenient and will tell him that I have decided to spare his life, and I will tell him the conditions upon which I will do so. You know those fellows are much more afraid of the vengeance of their own secret orders than they are of all the laws on earth."

"Yes."

"I will tell him that he is to use the afternoon in bringing about a full meeting of the brotherhood for to-night, at the headquarters in the Palisades. I will tell him that he is to make a speech to them when they are all assembled, in which he is to say that he has been acting in my name—that is, the name of Spada—at my request; that I will indorse what he says, and that thus the past will be forgiven and forgotten. You will have to be careful in going to the secret headquarters, that you do not encounter any of the members of the brotherhood who are on their way to the meeting."

"I had thought of that, and I will look out for it."

"Good! There is likely to be a full meeting to-night, anyway, on account of the execution."

"The execution?"

"Yes; of Ten-Ichi. Have you forgotten that he was to be executed at sunrise?"

"No. Now, one question more."

"Well, what is it?"

"Of course you can only guess at the number, but how big a membership do you suppose their brotherhood has in this country?"

"In the entire country? That is hard to guess at; but in this city alone, I should not suppose there would be more than a score of them, if there are so many as that. But I wish to take no chances, for I do not want one of them to escape."

"Del Carpio is reviving. Shall I take him away at once?"

"Yes, at once. And remember your instructions."

"I will not forget them."

* * * * * * *

As soon as Nick Carter was alone in the room, and he was sure that Chick and Del Carpio had passed through the barroom without question, which he had no doubt they would do without difficulty, he descended to the cellar, where his other prisoner was undergoing the severe tortures of regret.

He brought him to the room overhead without difficulty, and after releasing him from his bondage, he handed him a brush and suggested that he brush away the soil of the cellar from his clothing.

"What is to be my fate?" asked the man, calmly.

"What fate do you think you deserve, Bonito?" asked Nick, as calmly.

"Death."

"And are you willing to meet it?"

"If I must meet it—yes."

"And what if I have decided to spare you?"

"What!" cried Bonito.

"And what will you consent to do if I have decided to spare you?"

All the man's calmness was gone in an instant. He cast himself on the floor at Nick's feet, almost in tears.

"I will be your slave," he said.

"Good," said Nick. "Then I will spare you."

Then, in a few words, he told him that he was to go about the city and to request that every member of the brotherhood present himself at secret headquarters at midnight, or a little before that time, so that they would all be inside the house at twelve o'clock.

"As for yourself, Bonito," he said, "you are to meet me alone at the foot of One Hundred and Fifty-fifth Street at half past eleven. I will also be alone: but I will have a rowboat in readiness and we will cross the river together. You shall enter the place of meeting with me. We will walk side by side among our brothers, and hereafter we will divide among them the authority of our order. I will return, perhaps to Italy, and you shall be chief among them here. Is that enough?"

"Ay; it is more than enough, when I expected only death."

"I do not believe that you cut the rope, Luigi," said Nick.

And Bonito turned away his head, while Nick muttered to himself:

"That is the biggest lie I ever told."

* * * * * * *

Eight bells, the call of midnight, struck upon the deck of a solitary vessel which had anchored for the night just above Fort Lee, at the very instant when Nick Carter, accompanied by the man, Bonito, landed from a small boat in front of the fissure described by Del Carpio.

"We are in time," said Nick.

"In good time," assented Bonito.

They pulled the boat up on the shore and glided forward together toward the fissure. In a moment more they were lost in the deeper darkness of the place, and as they disappeared, other forms came into view along the edge of the river.

These forms, a score in number, darted from bush to bush, and from rock to rock, keeping out of sight as much as possible, and presently they also disappeared by the same path that was taken by Nick Carter and his companion.

When Nick and Bonito arrived at the door, Nick held back while his companion gave the warning signal.

It was answered as Del Carpio had said it would be, and the man appeared with only the one domino.

But the detective had decided what he would do,

and at once, without hesitation, he stepped forward and took the domino in his hands.

"I have the number before the first one," he said, coldly.

"And I," said Bonito, "have the number that is the first one. Give me your domino and mask, and do you procure another one."

Then, with a low bow to Nick Carter, in which he appeared to apologize for leading the way, he went on ahead, and Nick followed, while the other man, who had come out to question them, darted off to one side, doubtless in search of another domino.

Bonito led the way directly to a platform which stood at one end of the dome-shaped room, for the house was as it had been described, nothing more than a heap of rocks which had been thrown together for that particular use; but he stepped aside for Nick to mount to the chair, and then he himself took a seat on the ground among the body of men who had gathered there.

A quick and searching glance around the place, which was lighted by lanterns and candles, assured Nick that there were less than a score of men gathered there, and as he mounted the platform he turned and waved his hand.

"Where is the prisoner who is to be executed at sunrise?" he demanded, without preface.

"Here," was called from the other end of the room.

"Bring him here," ordered Nick; and in another moment Ten-Ichi was brought toward him, wrapped in many feet of rope, so that he was incapable of motion, and laid on the platform at his feet.

It was the detective's intention to kill such time as had to be overcome until the arrival of the detail under command of Chick, by making a speech in which he intended to explain, as he had outlined to Chick, the conduct of Bonito; but as he was on the point of beginning his speech, there was a rap at the door and he knew that his men were already on hand.

As before, when a summons came, a sentinel went to the door.

The Brotherhood of the Crossed Swords had no fears of interruption in that place, save by the initiate, and it did not occur to them that they could be intruded upon by strangers, and so it happened that not one of them turned his head when the sentinel went out, or when he appeared to return, accompanied by another member.

Nor, after that first glance did they look around again. If they had, they would have seen that many dark forms followed the first two who entered; and they were not apprised of the fact that they were in danger until they were startled by the sudden flashing of a score of electric searchlights—pocket searchlights—in their midst.

Then they started to their feet with wild cries, but they were met as they turned by a score of Winchester rifles aimed at their hearts, and without an exception they threw up their hands and surrendered then and there.

They were not men who would fight against odds.

An Italian is not a man who will fight at all until he loses his temper, and then he will fight like a demon. Taken by surprise, as these men were, they have no fight left in them.

Such, my readers, is the end—and, indeed, such was the end of the Brotherhood of the Crossed Swords in America.

Every member who belonged to the order, save two, and they escaped to their own country, was captured in that raid, and as we already know, Ten-Ichi was saved.

Patsy was the only disgruntled character in the story, for he claimed that he had thought he might have a hand in it at the last, whereas he was left at home to guard a red-headed Spaniard.

THE END.

Next week's issue, No. 404, will contain "The Trail of the Vampire; or, The Mysterious Crimes of Prospect Park." This contains an exploit of the great detective in an entirely new field. The facts related in this story have been known for some time in inner police circles, but never before have they all been set forth as they actually occurred.

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